

MODDING your own “WINDOWS PE” DISTRO

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Yesterday I was faced with a very unique problem; it would seem that Dell now ships their systems with floppy drives as an option. This means that if you really need to have one, you have to pay extra for it. Some people think that this is not a problem because they do not see the need for floppy drives anyway (with CDR/CDRW/DVD-RW being the craze). At first this might seem true, but what happens to system administrators or tech consultants like myself who need to boot from a floppy? At the moment, my machines are syspreped using sysprep, to have unattended installs. I then make an image of that machine which I can put on CD's or I can boot from a network bootable floppy for “ghostcasting” or I can just simply ghost the machine from the server. The latter of these is the simplest. Who wants to walk around with CDs for 30 machines? Not I. Microsoft has been pushing RIS servers, but in my current environment this does not work well for me, so Symantec ghost seems to be it for now. This brings me back to my original problem.

There are, of course, several ways of booting from a floppy drive to the network. Ghost comes with its own utility for this, but you have to add your NIC drivers if its not included. With ghost, this is fairly simple to do. Another way (which is my favorite) is to use Bart's BFD floppy utility (<http://www.nu2.nu/bfd/>) but not without adding support for my regularly used NIC drivers as well. There seems to be an abundance of 3Com cards but not so much for the Intel brand.

Microsoft does not support booting from USB devices, so booting from a USB floppy drive would be out as well. The only logical step would be to boot from a CD-ROM device which has network support so I can get to my beloved ghost images. At first thought, I jumped at my Super Utilities PE CD, but after selecting F4 to get to Bart's network boot utilities I found that the auto detect would not work because my Intel E1000 card is not supported. This is the card of choice for the new Dell Optiplex Gx260/270's. There must be a way to boot to the network from the CD right? There were drivers for common 3com cards to do this so I knew it was possible, I just had to find out how to do it for my Intel E1000. Some people might be thinking, “Well why don't you just copy the files from the floppy onto the CD-ROM and boot from that?” Whether you use ghost's boot wizard or Bart's BFD utilities, that idea won't work because they are specifically made to write to a floppy drive.

